

## Celebration and Strength, and l'hitraot

B'har-Bechukotai

Amarillo TX

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At the end of my Torah chanting today, I added three words, as is customary when concluding a book of the Torah: *Chazakchazakv'nitchazek* – Be strong, be strong, and may we be strengthened.

This custom is connected to a verse in the beginning of the book of Joshua. Moses has just died, and it seems God feels it necessary to give Joshua a bit of a pep talk. As part of this motivational speech, God instructs Joshua not once, not twice, but three times (1:6, 7, 9): “*chazakv'ematz*” – be strong and of good courage!

We can understand pretty easily how Joshua might have needed some words of encouragement from God – after all, following in the footsteps of Moses is no easy task! But what is the meaning of the custom that has grown out of it? What encouragement, what motivation do we need at the completion of a book of Torah? We have just finished something! Shouldn't we be celebrating?

Yes.

And.

The Torah is a pretty hefty text, and each book is full to the brim with teaching and tasks for completion.

We learn rules and regulations,

We learn about God's love and God's anger.

We learn about and learn from all of the ordeals our ancestors slogged through,

and we come out at the end of each book somewhat bedraggled ourselves.

We have learned so much, but with great power comes great responsibility; it is not enough to simply make it through the text – we must grapple with it, turn it over and over again (Ben Bag Bag).

And yet there is no reprieve, no time to digest – this is not really the “end”; we are not allotted a week “off” from Torah. Next week we begin the book of Numbers, and the learning continues. So we need *chazak*, strength, both to take in what we have learned and to forge onward into the next piece of text.

An end that is not really the end – a space for transition, a moment to mark the completion of one thing and the beginning of another.

That sounds familiar.

On Sunday afternoon at 4:15 pm, I will board a Boeing 737 operated by Southwest bound for Denver and then Los Angeles. My next flight is not booked, as it has been for the past two years. My time as the student rabbi of Temple B’nai Israel is almost at its end.

But ending something doesn’t always mean it’s over.

The Hebrew word we use when taking leave from each other is “*l’hitraot*” which translates as “to see again”.

Proverbs 27:19 tells us that “Just as water brings us face to face, so too does the hart bring us person to person.” Just as we see our reflections in pools of water, so too do we see ourselves in in each other, and see each other in ourselves; and so when we say *l’hitraot*, we are giving little bits of ourselves to each other.

If *l'hitraot* meant goodbye, we would lose those bits and pieces. But instead, *l'hitraot* reminds us that we can think of “goodbye” as a transition, part of a chain of events and meetings much greater than ourselves.

The skills I have learned here, the people I have met and the lessons you have each taught me (and you have each taught me something) are the bits and pieces of you that I will carry with me throughout the rest of my life. Who knows how the world works? I very well may see many of you again throughout my life; both literally and in faces of others.

So tonight we do three things: we celebrate our time together, we say *chazakv'nitchazek*, be strong and we will be strengthened – because every transition requires strength.

And we also begin to say *l'hitraot*, ‘til next time – when we can fit our bits and pieces and “remember-whens” back together.

For more sappiness and *l'hitraot*-ing, please join me tomorrow night at the Rodriguez home for havdalah – for now we'll stick to celebration and *chazak!*